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How to (actually) save time while working remotely

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Abstract: The pandemic has given many of us the opportunity to ditch the commute and work from home long-term, offering huge potential time savings. But to truly reap the benefits of remote work during the current crisis and beyond, we need to think proactively about how we restructure our workday in this new normal. The authors suggest six concrete, research-backed actions you can take today to create clearer work-life boundaries and optimize how you spend your time.

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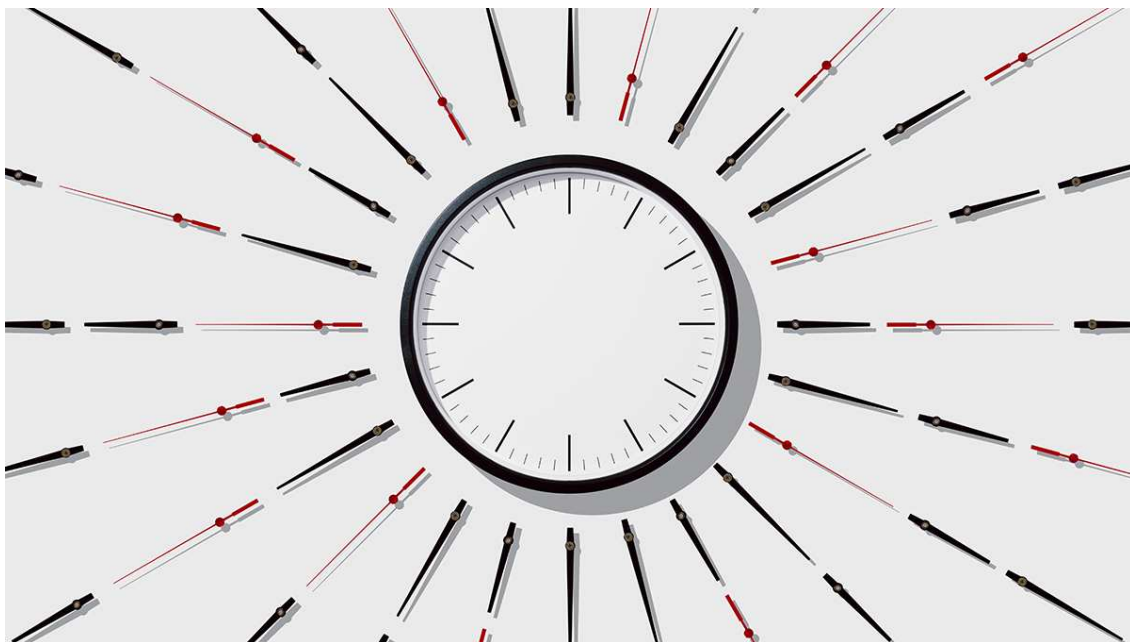
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Managing Yourself

How to (Actually) Save Time When You're Working Remotely

by Lauren C. Howe, Ashley Whillans, and Jochen I. Menges

August 24, 2020



MirageC/Getty Images

Summary. The pandemic has given many of us the opportunity to ditch the commute and work from home long-term, offering huge potential time savings. But to take full advantage of this new normal, we need to adopt concrete, research-backed actions you can take today to create clearer work-life boundaries and optimize how you spend your time. [close](#)

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While the widespread shift to remote work hasn't been without its challenges, it does offer a major silver lining: For many of us, commuting has become a thing of the past. In the United States alone, eliminating the daily commute has saved workers around 89 million hours each week — equivalent to time savings of more than 44.5 million full workdays since the pandemic began! These numbers suggest that working remotely could be a *deus ex machina* for reclaiming one of our most precious and limited resources: time.

But despite the potential for staggering time savings, many have struggled to achieve everything they hoped the pandemic would finally make time for: baking sourdough, meditating, or writing the next great literary masterpiece. On the contrary, data we collected from 12,000 people across the U.S. and Europe during the pandemic show that the additional time is often burned on unproductive work and unsatisfying leisure activities. Having more time does not necessarily mean that we use it wisely. So, what are we doing wrong?

Lesson #1: Working from home or living at work?

Without an office to commute to, the separation between work and home becomes tenuous. Although research shows that people rate their commutes as one of the most stressful and undesirable parts of the day, having no commute at all causes problems too.

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In a series of studies, we found that being on the road can help people switch gears between home and work, and that without a commute, people struggle to separate their work and personal lives. Instead of shutting down the





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computer and rattling home on a crowded train at 6 PM, many people are working later than ever, “just one more email” stretching into an extra two hours hunched over the laptop. And that additional work time is not always well spent.

In our studies, people reported being stuck in more meetings during the pandemic than before, doing too much “agenda-setting,” not doing enough creative collaboration, and filling their time with more unproductive work. In a perfect illustration of Parkinson’s law, that work expands to fill the time available for its completion, the average 53 minutes per day people saved by not commuting was often immediately absorbed by additional, less productive work.

Lesson #2: Saving time or wasting time?

When people did manage to gain free time, it often wasn’t spent wisely: Our surveys found that activities we call “passive leisure” — such as watching TV — rose dramatically, while “active leisure” activities such as volunteering or socializing became less frequent. While a bit of passive leisure is a healthy way to relax, our research suggests that it’s much less likely than active leisure to promote happiness.

Admittedly, the pandemic has made many active leisure activities challenging. But we’ve seen plenty of creative ways to pursue active leisure while following social distancing guidelines, such as Zoom game nights and happy hours, clever socially distant sports, and virtual volunteering.

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During a time of global crisis, it’s healthy to prioritize relaxation, and it’s normal that others struggle to find the right mix of activity at work. But as we begin to semi-normalcy, what can we do to ensure we use our time savings to pursue meaningful activities that make us truly



happy?

Through our research, we found several strategies that can help you structure your workday to enable clearer boundaries and more time for active leisure:

1. Create your own commute.

For many of us, commuting was when we would get into “work mode.” But that transition doesn’t have to come from a physical commute. Research shows that the most-desired commute length is 16 minutes, so when you’re working remotely, take that time to find another way to transition into work mode. (We don’t mean literally pretending to be on a subway, as some Londoners have taken to doing.)

Specifically, a recent study of ours revealed that the happiest commuters are those who use their commutes to plan their workdays. So try starting your remote workday by taking 15 minutes to plan your day, either at home or with a short morning walk. In fact, walking is a form of active leisure that’s known to reduce stress, so it’s good idea to find ways to deliberately build some walking back into your day.

2. Give yourself a Feierabend.

In Germany, the Feierabend is a daily evening celebration marking the moment when work is switched off for the day — often accompanied by a hearty German beer. Whether you finish the day with a beverage, a snack, going for a run, or calling a friend, find a ritual that can mark the end of your workday and give you something to look forward to. These daily routines help you celebrate what you have accomplished during the day (rather than focusing on what still needs to be done),

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If your to-do list is anything like ours, it is always too long. To avoid



drowning in work, identify a must win for each day — one thing you need to achieve no matter what — and then pursue it at full steam. In the face of constant interruptions from email and messaging platforms, staying focused on your top priority is a real accomplishment. And if you complete your must win, research shows the resulting sense of achievement is likely to have a significant impact on your happiness.

4. Put “proactive time” on your calendar.

Protect your calendar from never-ending Zoom meetings by blocking out “pro time,” or time reserved for work that is highly important, but not urgent. Our studies have found that scheduling a daily pro-time block, in which you turn off all distractions and focus on specific tasks, helps employees feel more effective and less overwhelmed. Pro-time can prevent you from focusing only on the next deadline and getting bogged down with less meaningful work, making your days feel more productive and less stressful.

5. Reclaim the social in social distancing.

The strategies above can help you get some of your time back. But more time in and of itself is meaningless — it’s what you do with it that matters. Are you using your newfound free time to connect with other people? To start exercising, or volunteering? Just like scheduling pro-time during the workday, we recommend being proactive about scheduling active leisure activities after work.

This doesn’t have to be a big commitment. Research suggests that short informal social interactions (whether in person or digital), as well as just 10 or 20 minutes of active leisure, boosts well-being. This isn’t about dedicating two hours to socializing every day, but rather spending 20 minutes catching up with a friend or going for a walk.

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million readers keeping up with the latest in management. You can even maximize active leisure by combining social time with other pursuits, such as exercising together with a friend. This way you can kill two birds with one stone; plus, involving others in your goals makes it easier to stick to them.



In addition, try building social opportunities into the flow of your normal workday. For instance, studies show that using commute time to connect with others — even strangers on a train — promotes happiness. To replicate this while working remotely, perhaps part of your end-of-day routine could be a chat with a family member or friend.

6. Run time-management experiments.

Today, we're all part of a grand experiment in how we use our time. But even after pandemic restrictions are lifted, it's a good idea to keep trying out new time management schemes to see what works best for you.

For example, here at the University of Zurich, our team invented a “3-2-2 week” that gives us a good balance: each week, we spend three days at the office (yes, we think the commute time is worth the conviviality that only the office can afford), two days working from home, and two days dedicated to family and friends. Experiment with structuring your days and weeks in different ways to see what feels best for you, during the pandemic and beyond.

Around the world, shifting to remote work could save billions of hours — but it's up to us to spend that time well. Now is the time to make thoughtful choices about how we reshape work to get more of what we all crave most: time.

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